Luther’s Impact on the Life of the Church

The church that Martin Luther grew up in was a place of go-betweens. He was taught that if you wanted to be at peace with God, you needed go-betweens. God was far too angry over sin for the normal human being to go to him directly. So there existed a whole cadre of priests, monks, bishops, popes, and saints who needed to intercede on your behalf if you were ever to have peace with God.

What Luther rediscovered in Scripture was that the church is really an assembly of living saints who can go directly to God. Luther rediscovered in Scripture that Jesus has opened a way for ordinary people to go directly to God. Though raised to think he needed to go through intermediaries to appease God, Luther discovered that Jesus had given him total access to his heavenly Father.

With his newfound insight, Luther set out to transform the life of the church. Whereas worship had been a performance enacted by the priest and other worship leaders in the much-misunderstood Latin language, Luther transformed it so that the people could participate. He translated the services into the language of the people so that everyone could participate in the prayers and praises. He prepared the first hymnal in 1524, made up of just eight hymns. But the people could now sing them. He translated the Bible into the language of the people (the New Testament published in 1522, the Old Testament in 1534) not just so they could understand the lessons read in the services, but so that they could read the Word of God for themselves. To enable the children to understand the Word of God, he wrote two catechisms in 1529—the Small Catechism, worded so simply that children could memorize the six chief parts of Christian doctrine, and the Large Catechism, which was based on a series of sermons written on those six chief parts.

Luther’s transition from an intermediary church to a participating church called for involvement. His Small Catechism was not just intended for pastors and teachers to use in teaching children. Each part was introduced with the words, “As the head of the family should teach it in the simplest way to those in his household.” While the church of his boyhood encouraged action, too many of those actions were designed to enrich the powerful leaders of the church. Men and women were encouraged to become monks and nuns because it involved giving away all their money. People were encouraged to go on expensive pilgrimages to the sites of departed “saints” as a way of doing good works that were supposedly pleasing to God. Luther redirected people to the much more practical commands of God. Rather than man-made vows of celibacy or donations to the shrines of the saints, God’s Word encouraged marriage, raising a family in the fear of the Lord, carrying out one’s occupation for the good of the community. These were the much more practical purposes for life that God had laid out in his Word. This was the real “life of the saints” on which Luther refocused the people of his time.

Not only did Luther preach and teach this. He lived it. Married in 1525 to a former nun, Katherine von Bora, Luther transformed the ministry from an intermediary office to the common experience of the members of the congregation. An important part of our Reformation heritage is that the life of the church is the common life of sinners who have been turned into saints by the blood of Jesus. Connected now to Jesus through his Word, believers reflect and proclaim his love and forgiveness every week and every day to the people around them. This is the life of the church. This is our Reformation heritage.